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John Dingell's Journey

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By Howard Fineman

President Obama's smile as he signed the health-care bill today reminded me of a private smile I saw Sunday night during the big vote—the historic vote—on the measure. Another man was smiling, because he saw the measure as the culmination not of a two-year crusade, but rather one that really had begun 53 years ago.

On that night I made my way down an eerily quiet corridor to a "hideaway" office on the first floor of the House side of the Capitol. I'd been told the number of the otherwise unmarked spot, but there was no other sign on the tall mahogany door as I turned the knob without knocking and entered.

The scene was as casual as it was remarkable: 83-year-old Congressman John Dingell of Michigan in his shirtsleeves, his long frame stretched out on a couch as he watched the C-Span feed of the House proceeding.

He slowly sat up, stuck out his hand for a handshake, and smiled in triumph. "This bill isn't everything I might have wished for," he told me. "No piece of legislation is perfect. What we do here is incremental. But I'm happy. And I know my dad would have been, too. He would have said, 'Son, you did all right.'"

If Obama is the Moses of the new health-care law, Dingell is the Aaron—except that, unlike Aaron, he's happily alive to reach the (incremental) promised land. "There is a certain

satisfaction," said Dingell as he kept an eye on the TV.

Dingell's own father was a New Deal Democratic congressman and champion of a New Deal–style national health-care system, a bill he first introduced in 1943. When Dingell took over the seat from his late father in 1955, the old man's bill was in the hopper—but never voted on. The son introduced a similar bill every year, starting in 1957. Every year, including this year. The new Obamacare law is far different from—and short of—that government-run New Deal vision.

But it's fair to say that Obama and the Dems wouldn't be where they are today (for good or ill, depending on your politics) had it not been for the efforts of Dingell over the years. In his youth and then heyday as a committee chairman and party leader, he helped pass Medicare in 1965—Nancy Pelosi used his ceremonial gavel on Sunday night—and every other expansion of health-care law and legislation.

Dingell was ousted from his chairmanship in a power play by Rep. Henry Waxman (as his fellow Californians Pelosi and George Miller looked the other way), but in one of the final but appropriate ironies of the bill's saga, Dingell provided a key boost toward final passage by having a long, private chat with the key holdout and fellow Michigander, the anti-abortion Rep. Bart Stupak. "We're both Slavs," said Dingell. "Slavs get angry and crazy, but in the end we know how to talk to each other. Bart's a great guy, and he handled himself well."

And so the bill passed, and John Dingell could rest easy on the couch.